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UNCLAS HANOI 000240

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL MASS VM US

SUBJECT: VVAF AND MOD SIGN HISTORIC AGREEMENT TO CONDUCT LANDMINE/UXO SURVEY

¶1. (U) Another small, but historic step in the bilateral relationship took place in Hanoi on January 27, when the Ministry of Defense (MOD) signed an MOU for a survey of landmines and UXO with the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation. The Director of Defense Ministry's Demining Command (BOMICO), Senior Colonel Bui Minh Tam, signed for MOD, and David Holdridge, VVAF Country Representative and a veteran, signed for the United States. DCM and DATT attended.

¶2. (U) The Department's Humanitarian Demining Program (HDP) set aside \$6 million for the Vietnam Level-One survey, formally known as the Vietnam Landmine/UXO Impact Assessment and Survey Project. It includes data collection, field surveys to verify the data, and data analysis. Phase one of the survey will last 12 months and cover the provinces of Quang Tri, Quang Binh, and Ha Tinh, all in central Vietnam. Phase two will include other contaminated provinces and occur after both parties review the results of phase one. Results will be consolidated into narrative reports and digital maps. VVAF will implement the project on behalf of the Department.

¶3. (U) The GVN-controlled local press gave the signing ceremony good coverage, another sign of the significance of the event for the GVN. This followed in the wake of two 'prep' articles that were published last week in the Army Newspaper and Vietnam News. At the annual meeting between the Committee for Foreign NGO Affairs and Foreign NGOs, Deputy Foreign Minister Le Van Bang interrupted his 25-minute prepared speech to speak extemporaneously in support of the groundbreaking signing. At the same event, the President of the Vietnam Union of Friendship Organizations, Mr. Vu Xuan Hong, also specifically focused on the signing, stating that he very much appreciated the understanding, determination and patience of VVAF and that this was a very important event.

¶4. (U) Comment: Negotiations on the MOU began in May 2001 and took a long 20 months, stalled in part on GVN/PAVN sensitivities over where the survey would be conducted and the need for it to avoid sensitive border areas. Agreement to sign the MOU clearly came from the top of the GVN and Communist Party. Negotiations over phase two of the project could also be difficult. Nonetheless, the fact that the MOD and an American veterans organization could reach agreement to sign the MOU is another positive sign for US-Vietnam relations and, hopefully, help reduce the lingering suspicion caused by the war. The event also marks the first time that the Defense Ministry has signed an agreement with an NGO. BURGHARDT